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STATE FOR EAP AND PM
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/07/2018

TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [AS](#)

SUBJECT: GUIDANCE REQUEST: ALLEGATION USG SOUGHT TO TEST
NERVE GAS ON AUSTRALIANS

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Daniel A. Clune. Reasons: 1.4(b),(d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is an action request - please see paragraph 4 below.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Australian newspapers, quoting recently declassified Australian government documents, carried stories over the July 4 weekend alleging the U.S. Government had asked the Australian government in 1963 to permit aerial testing of VX and GB sarin nerve agent on Australian troops in Queensland. According to the stories, the U.S. proposal included a request that the GOA conceal the nature of the testing, including from the troops on whom they would be conducted. The Australian government at the time did not respond to the U.S. request, according to the press stories.

[1](#)3. (C) At the Embassy's request, staff of Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon, currently in Hawaii and en route to Washington, provided a background paper used to brief the Defence Minister that includes further details (see full text at para 5 below.)

[1](#)4. (C) ACTION REQUESTED: Embassy requests guidance for possible use in responding to media inquiries. Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon has indicated he will raise this issue during his forthcoming visit to the United States, possibly including during his July 8 call on PACOM Commander Keating and during his call next week on Secretary Gates. In addition, although no press had contacted the U.S. Embassy as of COB July 7, we anticipate the need for guidance to respond to press inquiries over the coming days, particularly for a previously-arranged radio interview of the Charge in Adelaide July 9 on a range of topics.

[1](#)5. (C) Following is the text of the background paper provided by Defence Minister Fitzgibbon's staff:

Begin text:

Nerve Gas test plans

Regarding widespread reporting - The Australian, SMH, Sunday Program, Advertiser 07/07/08 - that recently declassified National Archive documents reveal an American plan to test Nerve Gas on Australian Defence Force members during the Cold War.

Background

Recently declassified documents held by the National Archives contain information that the US wanted to test Nerve Gas on Australian soldiers at the height of the cold war.

The Australian reports that under the plan, 200 Australian combat troops, presumably wearing 1960s-era chemical protection suits, were to be subjected to aerial bombardment in the Iron Range rainforest near Lockhart River in far north Queensland. The Australian also reports that the plan is not believed to have been acted upon.

The nerve agents were to include VX and GB, better known as sarin nerve gas. The aim of the tests was to gauge the effectiveness of nerve agents in jungle warfare at a time when US military involvement in Vietnam was intensifying.

The US proposal is alleged to have made by US defence secretary Robert McNamara in July 1963, according to Defence Department and Prime Minister's Office documents.

The documents stated that of the 200 troops to be used in the tests, "only four to six would need to know the full details of the operation".

The US proposal is reported to have recommended that the Australian government keep the nerve agent tests secret, describing them as either "equipment testing" trials or "land Qdescribing them as either "equipment testing" trials or "land reclamation" experiments.

The Australian reports that the Australian government is believed to have not responded to the initial US proposal in 1963, but in 1966 Washington approached the new prime minister, Harold Holt, with a request to drop tear gas on Australian troops. Reports say that again, Canberra quietly ignored the request.

A former Holt staffer told the Sunday Program that the then Government was concerned that its Cold War alliance with the US would be damaged if it refused to allow the tests.

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who was Minister for Army from 1966-68, denied knowledge of the US requests.

COMMENTS BY MINISTER FITZGIBBON - 06/07/08

"(It is) difficult to believe any such request came forward, but if it did, surely it would have been rejected by the conservative government of the day out of hand".

"I have asked Defence for an urgent and full briefing on this matter. I can certainly rule out any such testing in the future."

New lines for the Minister:

--I am aware of reports that the United States sought to test nerve gas in Australia during the 1960s.

--I am advised that the United States did seek Australian agreement to conduct experiments using chemical agents in Far North Queensland, as they had no suitable sites available in areas under their control.

--I am advised that in 1964, the Cabinet agreed it was not appropriate to allow such trials to be carried out in Australia and agreed to advise the United States of this decision.

--I am advised this information is available on the public record. Relevant cabinet papers were released in the mid-1990s under the provisions of Archives Act, 1983.

--I am advised the United States was made aware of the pending release of this information in 1994.

--I have asked the Department of Defence for an urgent and full briefing on this matter.

End text.

CLUNE